A THIRD GOLD COIN OF MERCIA

By H. E. PAGAN

The coin generally known as the ‘Ciołh’ solidus is typologically impossible. It is struck from two incompatible dies, the obverse a faithful reproduction of a Roman aureus of the second half of the fourth century, probably of Valentinian I or Valens, the reverse a version of the common Byzantine ‘cross on steps’ type. When the only known specimen first appeared, at the Bateman Heirlooms sale in 1893, no attempt was made to account for it; and this was again the case at the Grantley sale of 1944. In 1948 Dr. C. H. V. Sutherland, in his standard work on the Anglo-Saxon gold coinage, agreed with the coin’s present owner that the legend on the right of the bust reads CIOŁH, which is not in dispute. What I think does require critical examination in the light of progress made in this field in the last few years is his attractive and tentative attribution of the coin to King Ceol or Ceolric of Wessex, who reigned between 591 and 597.

Three coins known to Dr. Sutherland seemed to form a pre-thrymsa ‘solidus’ coinage: that under discussion, another very peculiar coin with a head on the obverse and a ‘Two Emperors’ reverse, and an imitation of a coin of Helena in the British Museum, to which it came in the George III collection. To these Mr. Philip Grierson added (NC 1955) three more, mules of the same kind as the ‘Ciołh’ coin but of a style and treatment so different that a direct relationship seemed to him unlikely. They are struck from two pairs of dies, one represented by a single coin in the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge, the other by coins at the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Germanisches National-Museum at Nuremberg. They appear to be English of 7th century date. Grierson suggested at the time that they were intended as ornaments from the first—as they certainly were used later, since traces of mounts adhere—and current opinion would agree. What is clear is that the ‘Helena’ and ‘Two Emperors’ coins cannot form part of a ‘solidus’ coinage since they always have been ornaments (Dr. J. P. C. Kent points out that the heavy gold rim that surrounds the ‘Two Emperors’ coin was part of it as first produced), and so, if the ‘Ciołh’ coin, which of all the ‘solidi’ has the most claim to be designed for currency, in that it looks the part, can be detached, the ‘solidus’ coinage must fail.

It is not a coin of Ceol of Wessex. In his 1955 paper Grierson showed that the ‘cross-on-steps’ design on the reverse is not derived from an original earlier than the reign of Heraclius (610-641), which rules out the attribution to Ceol. The spelling CIOŁH cannot refer to any of Ceol’s known successors (no regal coinage being known in Wessex anyway until the accession of Beorhtwic in 786), and the provenance of the Bateman coin, found near Manchester in 1849, inspires little confidence in a Wessex origin.

The letters to the right of the bust are C (with the top bar missing) I O (diamond-shaped) L H in Roman capitals of a size not found on either thrymsa or sceatta coinages; and the letters on the left-hand side are only smaller because the die is too large for the flan. There is no reason to believe that this is not a single continuous legend. The stumbling-block is that the legend appears to begin D–A–, which looks for all the world like a corruption

\[\text{1 The coin is illustrated in Brooke’s} \ English \ Coins, \ pl. \ LXV, \ 3.\]
of a legend such as DN VALENS AUG. If, however, instead of beginning at the bottom left of the coin and proceeding clockwise round the coin, one begins at the top right, reads the letters on the right-hand side, and continues from the top left downwards, one arrives at the legend CIOLHE (with the bottom stroke missing) A (probably unbarred) R D (reversed) — CIOLHEARD. Ciolh(e)arcl is a moneyer's name which appears on the coins of Offa, Coenwulf, and Ceolwulf I.

This is not unreasonable. Offa's moneyers possessed the technical accomplishment necessary to produce this coin, and were familiar with the prototypes from which this coin is derived; a late fourth-century bust lies behind several portrait coins of Offa and his successors, and, whether the reverse is copied directly from a Byzantine coin or from a Western imitation of one, English moneyers drew on a wide stock of foreign issues for their reverses, a Beneventine design—Beneventum struck a 'cross-on-steps' type—being imitated some years later by Coenwulf's moneyer Oba. It is entirely coherent with the known habits of Offa's moneyers that no attempt has been made to reproduce the drapery of the prototype's bust, and that it has been replaced not by annulets, as it would have been at an earlier date, but by pellets. Two details of the legend, the diamond-shaped o and the reversed D, are seldom found on Anglo-Saxon coins, but reversed D's are found on two coins of exactly this period (a coin of Offa, moneyer Pendred, and a coin of Archbishop Aethelheard of Canterbury issued jointly with Coenwulf), and the o is quite frequent at this date, especially on the coins of Coenwulf which have been assigned to the London mint. The way in which the legend is to be read, too, is one confined, on English coins, to the coinage of Offa.

The recent re-appearance of a gold coin of the moneyer Pendred, similarly omitting the name of a king, makes it clear that the king's name was not a necessary adjunct on the gold coinage; it does not necessarily mean that the gold coinage was not official, although we should ponder the absence so far of any gold coin of the period of a definite Canterbury moneyer. The weight of the Ciolheard, 63.6 gr., lies halfway between that of the Offa dinar (66.0) and that of the Pendred coin (57.7). It is not consistent with that of the Helena coin (51.9).

Is it a coin of Offa or Coenwulf? Coins with the name of a moneyer Ceolheard, Ciolheard, or Ciolhard, are found both of Offa and of Coenwulf, not obviously linked, but quite possibly struck by the same man. Under Coenwulf he is considered to have struck at London. The coins of Offa sometimes have portraits and sometimes not, and are closely connected with those of Pendred; on them the moneyer's name is spelt Cioilhard or Celhard. Those of Coenwulf are of rather coarser work, although not entirely dissimilar; the moneyer's name is Ciolheard or Ceolheard. The coin could belong to either group; the peculiar arrangement of the legend, the attention to the details of the original, the use of pellets for drapery, and the connexion with Pendred and with a notable coin of Queen Cynethryth now in the Fitzwilliam Museum, favour the first, the spelling of the moneyer's name, the size of the lettering, and its general appearance favour the second. We must seriously consider the possibility that Coenwulf, too, had his gold coinage.

The reverse legend has not been interpreted—it apparently reads, on the left, VOZ triangle, and, on the right, O (a c on its side?), two uncertain letters, triangle — and can only be assumed to be blundered. An optimist might read LONDONIA. The triangles on the left and right of the foot of the cross could be survivals of the c and B of CONOB, but the legend has come a long way from VICTORIA AVG; the lateness of the date would admit the possibility that the coin is copied from Charlemagne's coinage issued from Beneventum from 788 onwards,
of this type, and not from coins of Heraclius or his successor Constans II (641–688). The Beneventine coins carried the reverse legend DOMS/ CAROLUS, which is slightly nearer that on this coin; but the resemblance is not great. A feature of the reverse which appears on no other ‘cross-on-steps’ coin is the presence of two pellets at the top of the steps.

The duty that remains to be performed is to point out that the evidence of this coin’s obverse legend no longer has any bearing on the name of the man who was king of Wessex from 591 to 597. Manuscripts A, B, and C of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle give it as Ceol in their annal for 591, as does A in the genealogy at its beginning; manuscript E, which presents a good Northern tradition but seems to be no better at this point, calls him Ceolric. The spelling CIOLH was hardly appropriate to either.